



Tajikistan

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there are some areas of concern.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Government policies reflect a concern about Islamic extremism, a concern shared by much of the general population. The Government monitors the activities of religious institutions to keep them from becoming overtly political. As opposed to last year, there were no mosque closures during the period of this report, although the Committee on Religious Affairs did publicly announce that a number of unregistered mosques operate in the country. In contrast to previous years, the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SRCA) removed no imams from mosques. The Government, including President Emomali Rahmonov, continued to enunciate a policy of active secularism, which it tends to define in anti-extremist rather than in religious terms.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, some minority religious groups continued to experience local harassment during the period covered by this report. Some mainstream Muslim leaders occasionally expressed concern through sermons and press articles that minority religious groups undermine national unity.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy has promoted a message of tolerance not only among, but also within, faiths through public diplomacy efforts. In addition, the Ambassador meets regularly with community leaders of different confessions and the United States has provided computers and internet access for the country's Islamic University. Embassy staff investigate instances of potential discrimination and advocate strongly for Government tolerance of all faiths.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 55,300 square miles, and its population is approximately 6.8 million, although it is difficult to determine an accurate figure due to lack of registration of births in some rural areas. An estimated 95 percent of citizens consider themselves Muslims, although the degree of religious observance varies widely. Overall, active observance of Islam appears to be increasing. An estimated 30 to 40 percent of the rural population and 5 to 10 percent of the urban population regularly follow Muslim practices or attend services at mosques. The number of Muslims who fast during the holy month of Ramadan is high; up to 99 percent of Muslims in the countryside and 70 percent in the cities fasted during the latest month of Ramadan. Approximately 7 percent of all Muslims are Shi'a, 40 percent of whom are Ismailis. Most of them reside in the remote Gorno-Badakhshan region as well as certain districts of the southern Khatlon region and in Dushanbe. Most other Muslim inhabitants (approximately 90 percent) are Sunni.

There are approximately 230,000 Christians, mostly ethnic Russians and other Soviet-era immigrant groups. The largest Christian group is Russian Orthodox, but there also are registered organizations of Baptists (five), Roman Catholics (two), Seventh-day Adventists (one), Korean Protestants, which includes the Grace SunMin Church (two), Jehovah's Witnesses (one), and Lutherans (no data available). Other religious minorities are very small and include Baha'is (four registered organizations), Zoroastrians (no data available), Hare Krishnas (one), and Jews (one). Each of these groups is estimated to total less than 1 percent of the population. The overwhelming majority of these small groups live in the capital or other large cities. There are no accurate data on atheists in the country, but it is estimated that 0.01 percent of the population is atheist or does not belong to any confession.

Christian missionaries from Western countries, Korea, India, and elsewhere are present, but their numbers are quite small. The SCRA estimates the number of Christian converts since independence at approximately 2,000-3,000 persons, reflecting some increase since 2004. Some small groups of Islamic missionaries from Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern states also visited the country during the period covered by this report.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, the Government monitors the activities of religious institutions to keep them from becoming overtly political or espousing "extremist tendencies," and some parts of local administration misinterpret the term "secular state" as involving a bias against religion.

The extremist Islamist political organization Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) is banned and its members are subject to arrest and imprisonment for subversion. HT promotes hate and praises acts of terrorism, although it maintains that it is committed to nonviolence. The party's virulently anti-Semitic and anti-Western literature calls for the overthrow of secular governments, including those in Central Asia, to be replaced with a world-wide Islamic government called the Caliphate. Because HT is primarily a political, not a religious, organization and because of its encouragement of terrorism, authorities' actions to restrict HT and prosecute HT in accordance with international legal norms are not a restriction on religious freedom, per se.

Although there is no official state religion, the Government recognizes two Islamic holy days, Id Al-Fitr and Idi Qurbon (Eid al-Adha in Arabic), as state holidays.

According to the Law on Religion and Religious Organizations, religious communities must be registered by the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA), which is under the Council of Ministers and monitors the activities of all religious establishments. While the official justification for registration is to ensure that religious groups act in accordance with the law, the practical purpose is to ensure that they do not become overtly political. To register with the SCRA, a national religious group must submit a charter, a list of at least 10 members, and evidence of local government approval of the location of a house of worship, if one exists. Religious groups are not required to have a physical structure in order to register, but they cannot hold regular meetings without one. Individual believers--up to 10 persons--do not have to register with the SCRA in order to worship privately.

Responsibility for registration of neighborhood mosques is divided between the SCRA and local authorities, who must agree on the physical location of a given mosque. The SCRA is the primary authority for registration of non-Muslim groups; however, these religious groups must also register their place of worship with local authorities. According to the SCRA, local authorities may object to the registration of a place of worship only if the proposed structure does not meet with sanitation or building codes, or if it is located on public land or immediately adjacent to government buildings, schools, or other places of worship. If the local government objects to a proposal, the Government is required to suggest an alternative. In the absence of registration, local authorities can force the closure of a place of worship and members can be fined administratively. There were no cases of SCRA refusal to register religious groups during the period covered by this report nor were there reports of groups that did not apply for registration out of a belief that it would not be granted. However, there were isolated cases of local government refusal to register religious groups in their areas, such as in the city of Tursonzade, where officials demanded local registration for a branch of the Jehovah's Witnesses in addition to their registration with the SCRA..

Approximately 2,800 mosques are registered for daily prayers. So-called "Friday mosques" (large facilities built for Friday prayers) must be registered with the SCRA. There are 228 such mosques registered, not including Ismaili places of worship. Only one such mosque is authorized per 15,000 residents in a given geographic area. Many observers contend that this is discriminatory because no such rule exists for other faiths.

During the period covered by this report, President Rahmonov continued to strongly defend "secularism," a politicized term that carries the strong connotation of being "anti-extremist" rather than "nonreligious." In national speeches, the President cautioned against outsiders unfairly linking Islam to terrorism. While the vast majority of citizens consider themselves Muslims and are not anti-Islamic, there is a significant fear of Islamic extremism, both in the government and among the population at large.

A 1999 constitutional amendment permits religiously based political parties, although a 1998 law specifying that parties may not receive support from religious institutions remained in effect. Two representatives from a religiously oriented party, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT), were members in the Lower House of the National Parliament during the period covered by this report. There also were several deputies from the IRPT in regional and district parliaments around the country. The Government incorporated the IRPT in 1997 at the end of the civil war and is the only legal Islamic political party in Central Asia.

An executive decree generally prohibits Government publishing houses from publishing anything in Arabic script, but they have done so in special cases. They generally also do not publish religious literature, but have done so on occasion, including copies of the Qur'an. There are small private publishers that publish Islamic materials without serious problems. There is no restriction on the distribution or possession of the Qur'an, the Bible, or other religious works. There were no reported restrictions on religious-oriented press.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Official Government policy contributed generally to the free practice of religion, but local governments sometimes misapplied these policies. The Government did not explicitly ban, prohibit, or discourage specific religions; however, local authorities in some cases used the registration requirement in an attempt to prevent the activity of some groups.

The SCRA controlled participation in the Hajj and continued restrictions on pilgrims undertaking the hajj during the period covered by this report. The Government continued to require air travel for the Hajj, citing hygiene and safety concerns regarding

other means of travel. As a result, the number of hajjis decreased to 4,072 in 2005 from approximately 5,000 in 2004.

The local government of Tursonzade used administrative barriers to the registration of a place of worship for the Jehovah's Witnesses, in spite of their national registration. The SCRA intervened on behalf of the Jehovah's Witnesses, but the city administration had not registered the Jehovah's Witnesses by the end of the period covered by this report.

In August 2004, the Government allegedly used the Council of Ulamo, an ostensibly nongovernmental body that monitors and standardizes Islamic teaching, to pass a fatwa prohibiting women from entering mosques that did not have completely separate facilities for men and women. This is considered by some to be more of a political move than a religious move, since it reduces the access women have to IRPT messages, and allows the Government to monitor with fewer agents the discussions that go on in mosques. There were reports that some local officials have forbidden members of the IRPT to speak in mosques in their region. However, this restriction is more a reflection of political rather than religious differences.

Beginning in August 2002, the Government required all mosques to reregister with local authorities and the SCRA. Approximately 750 mosques were closed for failing to comply with this requirement, although many remained open as "teahouses" or other public facilities where observant Muslims went to talk and pray. The Government is no longer actively pursuing a registration campaign, but did announce that at least 26 mosques in different areas were operating without registration.

There were unconfirmed reports that in some cases, local government officials have forbidden Muslim women from having their photograph taken for an internal identification document while wearing the hijab, and that some schools prohibited girls from attending while wearing a hijab. The SCRA claims that this occurs rarely, and that they have interceded with the identification agencies in each case to make an exception. Reportedly, this is attributable to overzealous interpretation of what it means to be a secular country. In October 2004, officials refused to issue passports to approximately 100 women in Isfara who did not want to be photographed without a hijab.

Missionaries of registered religious groups are not restricted by law, and they continued to proselytize openly. Missionaries are not particularly welcomed by some local communities, and some religious groups experienced harassment in response to evangelical activities. During the period covered by this report, there were no reports of visa restrictions for Muslim missionaries.

The "ban" on printing in Arabic script is thought to be an attempt to prevent the publication of extremist literature, such as flyers circulated by the extremist Islamic political organization Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Authorities in Isfara continued to restrict private Arabic language schools (to include restrictions on private Islamic instruction) stemming from past reports that one such school was hosting a suspected terrorist. Restrictions on home-based Islamic instruction remained in place. While these restrictions were primarily due to political concerns, they affected religious instruction.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

During the period covered by this report, there were no reported cases of government officials harassing observant Muslims under the guise of combating extremist Hizb ut-Tahrir activities.

In contrast to previous years, there were no reports of arrests of high-profile Muslims, such as the 2003 arrest and sentencing of the IRPT's Deputy Chairman, Shamsiddin Shamsiddinov. The IRPT stated that this arrest was politically motivated, but did not allege it was part of a larger government campaign against religion.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Improvements Respect for Religious Freedom

In contrast to previous years, the SCRA did not conduct an "attestation," or examination of imams, which many observers maintained had been a way to control politically outspoken religious figures. During the period covered by this report, the SCRA did not remove any imams from their posts.

Gradually throughout the reporting period, officials suspended 2001 prohibitions issued by the mayors' offices in Dushanbe and certain areas of the Khatlon and Sughd regions against the use of loudspeakers for the daily call to prayer. These prohibitions were apparently not based on any central directive. The Government also responded when the Embassy expressed concern

over its actions with regards to the Jehovah's Witnesses registration, and has been a willing partner in resolving the issue.

In contrast to previous years, no religious groups reported administrative difficulties with their places of worship during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Conflict between different religious groups virtually is unknown, in part because there are so few non-Muslims. However, some Muslim leaders occasionally expressed concern that minority religious groups undermine national unity and complained that current laws and regulations give preference to religious minorities. While most citizens consider themselves Muslim and most of the inhabitants are not anti-Islamic, there is a pervasive fear of Islamic extremism among both the government and the general population.

In January 2004, a Baptist missionary was killed in his church in Isfara. A police investigation uncovered two suspects, one of whom fled the country. In February 2005, court officials sentenced a member of the radical Islamic group Bay'at to 24 years in prison for this murder. The other was arrested and in April 2005 was sentenced to fifteen years in prison.

During the period covered by this report, there were no events similar to the vandalism in 2003 that included fires in homes of two imams of the northern Sughd region and the scattering of Qur'an pages on the streets of a village. The investigations into these matters turned up no leads, and have since been closed.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

The Embassy intervened on behalf of the Jehovah's Witnesses with the SCRA and the government of Tursonzade, holding meetings and writing letters advocating for their registration.

Embassy officers regularly meet with Islamic leaders to discuss religious freedom and tolerance and to underscore the U.S. Government's commitment to religious freedom.

The U.S. Embassy supported programs designed to create a better understanding of how democracies address the issue of secularism and religious freedom. A group of Islamic scholars and imams traveled to the United States in May 2005 as a part of the Embassy's religious outreach strategy.

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